

Contributions

THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH: ITS ORGANIZATION AND THE LIMIT OF ITS AUTHORITY

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God's revelation of himself to men has ever been adapted to their needs. In the patriarchal dispensation the awakening conscience of man was quickened by visions and dreams. In the Mosaic dispensation there were many rites and ceremonies each of them presenting some truth in concrete form, while commands were definite and numerous and were attended by temporal reward or punishment.

The Christian dispensation has few symbols while the conduct of life is to be governed not by detailed commands but by the principles of the kingdom taught by Jesus and applied by the apostles. The church is the bottle for the new wine of the gospel. Its development was progressive and rather difficult to follow. Let us first arrange our facts and then deduce our conclusions.

I. JESUS AND THE CHURCH.

1. Jesus himself wrote nothing nor did he give instructions as to the organization of the church.

In Acts 1:20 Peter appeals, not to Jesus but to the Psalms for authority to choose a successor to Judas.

In Acts 6 deacons are chosen, not on Jesus' authority, but on the ground of need.

2. Jesus recognized himself as the founder and head of the church. In Matt. 16:18 He says "my church." In Eph. 1:22-23 the church is called his body. Therefore believers being added to the church are "added to the Lord," Acts 5:14, and are "members of his body," Eph. 5:30, and Saul persecuting the church was persecuting Christ. Acts 9:4.

3. The members of the church, the body, are to be like and controlled by the founder, the head. In Matt. 16:18 when Peter had confessed Jesus as the Son of God Jesus says "Thou art Peter (Greek *petra*, a rock) and upon this rock (Gr. *petros*, a cliff of rock) will I build my church." That is, "I have lived in character like the Father. You Peter have made that confession and living up to it will be like me. Therefore of just such as you will I build up a church." (Gr. *ecclesia* or "called out.")

4. Jesus recognizes authority in the organized church in that it may give advice to members. In Matt. 16:18 is the oft quoted passage "hear the church" but the principle involved in it cannot justify mandatory authority on the part of the church. If it has such authority we must find the grounds for it elsewhere.

II. THE APOSTLES AND THE CHURCH.

1. At first all work was done by the apostles. They were the only officers. This was the Pentecostal period. (See Note 1 below.)

2. As the disciples multiplied and had all things common need of helpers arose. Then deacons were chosen. (Gr. *dia-konos*, a servant.) a. By the church, Acts 6; b. For an indefinite period; c. In each church, Phil. 1:1; d. They were ordained, Acts 6:6; e. Their qualifications, Acts 6:3 "of good report, full of the Spirit and of wisdom." I Tim. 3:8. f. Their work, Acts 6:3, "serve tables." This implies care of all material matters. Philip and Stephen became preachers, Acts 21:8. (Note 2.)

3. *Evangelists* (A. D. 45) are first mentioned in Acts 13. As the name implies they were heralds of the good tidings. 1. They were chosen by the church and sent out. They preached and baptized and returned. Acts 14:21-24. 2. They taught, II Tim. 4:1-5; I Tim. 4:13-16. Philip had a home and a family, Acts 21:8.

4. *Elders*, A. D. 46 (Gr. *presbuteros*—whence *Presbyter*.) 1. Were ordained first by the apostles, Acts 14:23. 2. Were at first the same as bishops (Gr. *episkopos*, "overseer") Acts 20:28. 3. There were several in each church, Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5. 4. Their qualifications, I Tim. 3:1-8; Tit. 1:7-11. 5. Their work. 1. They constituted the "presbytery" or "official board" of the church. I Tim. 4:14. This appears from the fact that in Acts 11:30 we find them taking charge of mission money for the church at Jerusalem. In Acts 15:4, 23, and 16:4 and again in Acts 21:18-24 they are referred to as a body acting together. Compare the similar Jewish body. Acts 22:5; Luke 22:6. 2. They were overseers of the spiritual welfare of the church. They were to "feed the flock" Acts 20:8; I Peter 5:2, 3. Only a part of them however were preachers, I Tim. 5:17. They anointed the sick, Jas. 5:14. They were not to be rebuked, I Tim. 5:1. 3. The presbytery (I Tim. 4:14) seems to have had even in the apostles' days, a presiding officer. James, the brother of Jesus, seems to have held this position at Jerusalem. Acts 15:13, 19; 21:18. This officer came later to be called the bishop in distinction from the other elders. Note 3.

5. Other Officers. I Cor. 12:28, 29

1. Prophets and teachers. Among these were Barnabas and Saul, Acts 13:1; and Judas and Silas, Acts 15:32-35; these are mentioned together because there is no clear line of division in their work. As the church became better organized these offices merged into those of pastors and elders. Eph. 4:11. (Note 4.)

2. Minor helpers, I Cor. 12:29. "Helps government, etc." Among these were Urbanus and Aquila and Priscilla, Rom. 16:3, 9. Their work is not specified. Aquila and Priscilla were teachers. Acts 18:26. The "angels" (from *Angelos*, a messenger) of Rev. 2 and 3 were probably representatives of their respective churches. (Note 5.)

3. Spiritual gifts. Healing, tongues, wisdom, discerning of Spirits, I Cor. 12:8, 10.

These were "signs" which had their place in establishing the authority of the gospel but were not to be perpetual. I Cor. 13:8. (Note 6.)

6. In General

a. Some held several offices at the same time. I Pet. 5:1, Peter was an apostle and an elder; Acts 13:1, Paul and Barnabas were apostles and prophets, or teachers; Acts 8, Philip was a deacon and an evangelist.

b. Those who gave their time to the work were supported, I Cor. 9:13, 14. (Note 7.)

c. Christians were taught to desire the best gifts (I Cor. 14:1) yet not to seek place. Jas. 3:1.

d. There was no discrimination on account of sex, Gal. 3:28. Philip had four daughters who prophesied, Acts 21:9; while Priscilla was a teacher, Acts 18:26, and other women helped in the gospel, Phil. 4:3.

7. Discipline

1. Even the apostolic church had need of discipline. Converts were taught that (a) they were born of the spirit, John 3:5, (b) therefore were "new creatures," II Cor. 5:17, (c) dead to sin and alive to God, Rom. 6:11, (d) to grow in grace, II Pet. 3:18, (e) and to live holy, Eph. 4:1, II Cor. 6:14; Tit. 2:13, 14, etc.

2. Yet there were those who needed discipline. Illustrations: (a) The baptized but only partially converted, Acts 8:13-20. (b) Babes in Christ, I Cor. 3:1-4. (c) Abasers of the love feast, I Cor. 11:30. (d) Quibblers, Tit. 3:10. (e) The worldly, I Cor. 3:9, 10; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3-5, etc.

3. Such were corrected, (a) by the apostles, I Cor. 11:34. (b) By apostolic delegates, Acts 15:27. (c) By letters, I Cor. 4:14-18; I Tim. 3:14, 15. (d) By evangelists, II Tim. 4:2. (e) By the local church, I Cor. 5:5, 13.

4. Manner of correction: (a) Brotherly help for the fallen, Gal. 6:1; II Cor. 2:4-8. (b) Instruction, II Tim. 2:24, 25. (c) Reproof, I Cor. 11:22. (d) Harsh rebuke, Tit. 1:13. (e) Public censure, I Tim. 5:11, 20. As an illustration of this see Phil. 4:2. (f) Ostracism, I Cor. 5:11; Tit. 3:10; II Thes. 3:14. (g) Excommunication, I Cor. 5:5, 13; I Tim. 1:20; Tit. 3:10. (h) A charge against an elder required 2 or 3 witnesses, I Tim. 5:19. (i) Personal troubles were to be settled personally or by the advice of the church, Matt. 18:5-23; or by an arbitration committee of brethren, I Cor. 6:5; at least without going to law, I Cor. 6:1-8.

5. The purpose of discipline was not revenge but teaching, I Cor. 5:5; II Tim. 2:17, 18.

6. Human mistakes are overruled. Those put away God judges, I Cor. 5:12. Those retained who are yet dead branches shall perish, I Cor. 6:9, 10; II Tim. 2:19.

7. Reverence and obedience to the rulers of the church was taught, Heb. 13:17.